



Panel on Age Group Swimming Moderated by Tom Avischious (1995)

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Author

By Alec Wathen

Tom Avischious: The members of the panel will discuss some philosophical questions that had been sent to all age group chairmen across the country. Each panelist will give a brief introduction about themselves.

Tony Helfrich: I'm the head age group coach with the Stingray Swimming Team in Marietta, Georgia. We have 300 plus swimmers in our age group program. I coach the 14 and younger swimmers in our program. My main group is 11-14.

Patty Huey: I'm with the Mecklenburg Swim Club. I am entering my twelfth season with the team. We have a club of approximately 400 swimmers. The

kids I specifically deal with are 12-15 years old and I direct the pre-senior group, which has about 74 kids.

Tom Himes: I'm head age group coach of the North Baltimore Aquatic Club. We have about 120 kids on the team. I generally coach kids 10-16 years old.

Amy Parratto: I coach 10-year olds and younger. We have about 200 plus swimmers in two different facilities at Seacoast Swimming in New Hampshire.

Tom Avischious: I'm the head age group coach at Carmel Swim Club just north of Indianapolis. I directly coach the wonderful junior high age kids. I work with the 11-14 year olds, specifically.

Question: What is your definition of age group swimming?

Patty: I really believe that an age group swimmer is somebody, regardless of age, that competes within their certain age group. I believe that a 12 year old who competes consistently in senior type meets would be considered a senior swimmer whereas an 18 year old who is still competing within their age group on a consistent basis would be considered an age group swimmer, so age group swimming spans all ages.

Tony: Performance is basically what I think of. Age group swimming includes all ages until they reach beyond Junior Nationals because I believe that is still the developmental level.

Amy: I pretty much view age group swimming as 14 and under.

Tom H.: I agree with Patty and Tony. Age Group swimming is through the Jr. National level.

Question: Do you think that USS has a policy or any type of philosophy regarding age group swimming? If so, what is it? If no, what do you think it should be?

Tom H.: There's a great gap between what they expect from the age group swimmer and what they expect from a senior type swimmer. It seems to me that USS wants us to pamper the age group swimmer and then suddenly have international level swimmers in the senior level. Hard work, a good amount of yardage or a great deal of yardage, to me, is something that should be done in age group swimming with the right kids. It doesn't have to be "doing less, trying to get more", handing caps out, creating camps. There's too great a gap between the age group philosophy of USS and the senior swimming philosophy of USS.

Tony: Development, retention, motivation is their basic philosophy. I've gone to meets in Canada. Their age group swimmers swim the 200's and their senior swimmers swim the 100s and the 50s and their power events. We

seem to be lagging behind in the U.S.. We're taught as coaches to develop an aerobic base and yet, our kids are competing in 50s and 100s. I don't think we're putting across the right message to our athletes. We are babying our kids to keep them in the sport and then we try to get them in the senior level and have to pound them because we're not working them hard enough to get there.

Amy: I see a very progressional philosophy from USS, but I don't think we have to baby our swimmers at the age group level. We have to be sensitive to how we bring them through the sport so that they're swimming at an older age. I think that USS is trying to address that, from what I've read.

Patty: I don't really think that USS is trying to have a philosophical policy regarding age group swimming. They take a more scientific view of it and try to measure it quantitatively. But I would agree with Tom, not in the sense that you have to baby your kids, because where people baby them, that's program specific. I don't believe that USS has a specific philosophical view of age group swimming. However, senior philosophy is clearly defined. They're working their way backwards in trying to develop it and define it. They see the importance of developing the young talents.

Tom A.: One of the things we discussed at an Age Group Planning meeting in January was that there was no official definition of what age group swimming is by USS standards. We received forty different answers to this question from the questionnaire sent to age group chairmen, so for the Age Group Planning Committee purpose, our definition includes social and emotional development of all swimmers up until the age of 18 or 19 years old; for competition purposes it's basically anyone below a Jr. National level in

terms of what the Committee is to look at. It seems as if Tom is of the opinion that there seems to be too much emphasis on, for lack of a better term, “fun and games,” as opposed to what you would consider quality. Please talk about that a little bit more.

Tom H.: You don't read too much about how to effectively keep the fun in and also hammer away at a lot of yardage for age groupers. We hear about the great amount of yards that the senior swimmers need to do or are doing and you look at Tom Dolan's plan to do 120,000 yards a week, but he didn't progress right into that. I think there are too many coaches who are scared to have an 8 year old swim a 500 free or to train an 8 or 9 or 10 year old to swim a 500 free even though that's what they're going to be doing down the line. We don't worry about a 50; I certainly don't. The program doesn't worry about 50's. There's nothing wrong with giving younger kids, such as 9 or 10 year olds, who are willing to do a decent amount of yardage, that kind of work. Coaches seem to be scared to work them a little harder than they think they can do. It's amazing how much yardage some of these little kids can do and still love it!

Tom A.: Give us an example of the yardage, so we know what you are talking about.

Tom H.: Whitney Phelps, at 9 and 10 years old, was probably in the area of 6K to 7K yards a day and as she was getting a little better, she was probably going 6 and 7 days a week. Whitney is 15 years old now and there's no inkling of not wanting to do it and she was willing to do it back then. She did the work and has to keep working hard, but she's in good position right now. She's had a pretty smooth transition all the way along. Beth Botsford is

a little bit different in that she didn't really start swimming until she was nine. She has an enormous amount of talent and built up the amount of yards she was doing and progressed right into the senior level program because she had a lot of base beneath it. There are a lot of age group programs that treat their 12 and unders as if they were 5 and 6 years old and suddenly at 13, it 's time to give them a lot of yardage; it just doesn't happen that way.

Tom A.: Amy, since you and Mike (Parratto) work closely together in developing the team, my guess would be that if Mike saw a workout of 6K for your 10 year olds, he probably wouldn't be real happy. Would that be correct?

Amy : That would be correct, but he wouldn't be coaching that 10 year old, either. We have a little bit different philosophy. We are a little more concerned about the long term development of the average swimmer. If we have exceptional swimmers, we might give them the opportunity to do more yardage. We're not going to hold anyone back if they're exceptional, but the average 10 or 11 year old is not really ready physically or physiologically to train. We definitely have a different view of age group swimming, but our results still yield the kind of successful results as you've had, so it's just a different way of doing it.

Patty: I think that's a great point. You have to work within your team's philosophy. It's a matter of the attitude and expectations the coaches have for their club. Mecklenburg Aquatic Club, like Seacoast, takes the long view. When the child enters our program, we expect them to be there for the rest of their career unless they move. That is our goal and our staff at the age group level is committed to teaching skills, making it fun and working it in so

they do appreciate hard work. It's not all "fun and games", but it's not slave labor. You've got to get them to buy into what you're doing, you have to present the plan and you have to have your parents behind you. It has to be fun, but hard work is fun and you just have to sell that philosophy. What you have to do is make sure that skills wise they're ready for that advanced yardage. Work with the coaches above and below you to make sure that the child will have a smooth progression toward their development. Hopefully, they'll stay in your program their entire career.

Tom A.: You may get the impression that Tom has everyone in their entire program that's 8, 9, 10 years old going 6 to 7 thousand yards. It's not the case, but you need to understand that for the last 5 or 6 years, North Baltimore Swim Club, according to the ASCA Motivational Times ranking, has been the "most successful" in terms of times that their age group has produced in the entire country. You may not always agree, but their club also has produced some pretty significant results and has placed a number of swimmers at the elite level, so I want him to respond.

Tom H.: My opinion is that coaches should not be afraid to take those athletes at a young age who are ready to do something like that to longer distances. To clump them all as a 12 & U swimmer and not work the elite — is there is such a thing and an elite 12 & U swimmer or 10 & U swimmer — a little bit more than your average, normal, day-to-day swimmer doesn't make sense. We do not have all of our 10 & U swimmers going 6000 yards. Don't be afraid to take those one or two kids who are ready to do something and have them do yardage.

Tony: You have to treat them individually. Girls, generally, tend to improve more quickly than the boys. You'll see the 10 to 13 year old girls who are hitting the Jr. National level and getting ready to go on to the senior. level swimming and you have to treat them separately and individually by moving them and challenging them. We shouldn't be afraid to challenge even our 8 & unders. It's fun to watch them swim back and forth, they enjoy it. They don't like to hear us talk all the time. You've got to sell the families on your philosophy and they've got to buy into it. You've got to have the fortitude to let people go if they don't buy in to the philosophy. Our philosophy is "Training For Life" and if they can't buy into that, who needs them?

Amy: I agree that you definitely have to educate your parents as to what your goals are as a team. At Seacoast, we've had quite a few "prima donnas" and we felt it very important to be a team member and not for them to get too much attention even through the papers, and not to focus on getting medals, but to focus on improving, wherever that peak performance lay, whether it's at 12 or 18 or 22. We are shooting for 22 or beyond.

Comment from Murray Stephens: If you have one or more good swimmers and you have an 800 practice, why not put the best swimmers in one lane and they go 200's while the 7 year olds go 100's? That way, they go 200's on 5:00 instead of 2:30 and to keep moving and progressing at the top of the group, the same as you progress the ones at the bottom. It so happens that the person at the top of the group is not only good for 9 years old, but almost good for an 11 year old. They're doing an 11 year old workout even though they're not in the 11-12 year old group. When you progress them like that, by the time they're 10, they are sometimes as good or better than the 11 and 12. At some point you have to make a choice; either training them in that 10 year old group and have them do workouts that are harder than the 12 & unders or move them into 12 & unders. Make that choice depending on their

maturity or their ability to go the whole workout. Tom used two good examples of Whitney doing anything you threw at her whereas, Beth wasn't physically capable of that kind of training, so she was the top person in the next lane.

Organize as you would organize a class in physical education, according to how they can do certain skills. If they happen to have high level capabilities, you give them a high level of application commensurate with their abilities. It's not right to make the whole group do 8 thousand yards or hold them all back and do 4 thousand. You have to treat them as individuals.

Patty: The problem I have is that you get mixed messages. When I went to the National Age Group Conference, we had all these lectures on bringing the kids along slowly and having the 10 & unders do 1500 yards and then the distance panel talked about how we need to develop distance swimmers. At 1500 yards, you're not going to get a distance swimmer. I think it's the responsibility of USS to develop a policy and guidelines.

Tom A.: I'm going to address that as Chairman of the Age Group Planning Committee. We will do exactly that. I don't believe USS has the scientific research to back up either method. What we need to do is try to do a good job of disseminating information. One of the things we are going to do is come up with five or six different models and let you pick and choose what you would like to do, to pick what best fits in your situation. Of all the people in the world, Dr. Orjan Madsen probably has the best scientific background for what he thinks is correct, but it's definitely not at all what you're hearing Tom say they do, so I think there's more evidence that USS has to have a role.

Comment from Rose Snyder: It would be wrong on USS's part to say there's one way and only one way to train age group swimmers. We need to find out what everyone is doing and then apply science to this. Coaches should keep track of what they are doing because you may have a Tom Dolan ten years from now and if we don't have any record of what that swimmer has done, it's not going to help us. We are very lucky to have a Russian woman who was in charge of the development of Russian swimmers. They were looking at nine biological levels from swimmers who were just starting out to the elite mastery level. We can not make any determination without any education. Hopefully, we'll get to the point where we are going to get more information based on scientific foundation to help you, but we need your input.

Comment (Audience): There is one more word I want to lead us off on — burnout. That's an escape word. Don't be afraid to train your swimmers when they are ready. They're going to let you know when they are ready.

Comment (Audience): I've got a group of 10 year old kids, so I'm concerned about the physiological aspects. John Leonard wrote an interesting article entitled "What If." What if you could train younger kids on long sets? We have 9 & 10 year old kids doing 10K IMs, 12K IMs. They have no problem with it; they love it! Some of these kids are not natural top 16 swimmers; they're your regular kids, but they like to do that so don't back away from it, have fun with it and experiment.

Tom A.: Let's move on to the next two questions: (1) How will the Sr. Committee's proposal to move Sr. Nationals to December and open up Jr. Nationals to any age effect Age Group Swimming? (2) Is there a difference today with the commitment level of swimmers coming into the sport?

Tom H.: As far as the Senior Committee plan to change the date, they had a coaches' meeting after the general meeting and it seemed like the discussion was all about how, if the schedule is changed, swimming is going to get faster. I, quite frankly, don't understand that. I guess their changing things around for whatever reason is good sometimes, but I think everybody is kidding themselves thinking that that alone is going to make USS faster. The ramifications of doing that are it will give all the college coaches a break by having them swim their kids at Nationals in December. It will give a lot of coaches time off over Christmas. I'm not so sure that that's not part of the thought behind the whole thing, but it won't do a thing for age group swimming and the development of the kids who are one day going to be at that level, unless you just rearrange everything and have your age group championships in December, which doesn't leave a whole lot of time to teach these kids, especially the new kids, how to do things. I think that's USS again not thinking of the overall picture and looking at one little spot which allows college kids to swim. I don't see where college swimming should have any play in what USS decides to do.

As far as age group swimming, most coaches coach "age group" kids. There aren't too many teams that have just Senior National kids and most coaches are going to be coaching all levels of kids. You're going to have a championship meet in December for one group of kids, another one in March for another group of kids and the training cycles of what you're doing, even in the same workout, are now going to have to be all different. I am not for it, Murray is not particularly for it, and I just don't see of what benefit it really

is. Certainly, it's going to be a real pain in the age group scenario trying to work things out.

Patty: From what I was hearing in the discussion, it seemed as if the leaders in the sport were concerned with the fact that everybody's catching up and in some cases, surpassing us at the very elite levels. Certainly, that's where this change is coming from and I can agree with Tom that maybe they weren't looking at what it does all the way down the line. Yet there again, most of us train the opposite of the whole entire world. Even though I coach age groupers, it makes sense to me to change the schedule because I think about how hard you train and all the things you accomplish during the summer, and then you have this huge break. It would be a better training plan and help prepare us better to perform at the very highest levels. Being an age group coach, the schedule is already determined by what happens at the Sr.National level. What's new about that? I don't see where it's that big of a change in that sense. Concerning the commitment level of athletes, I think most of us in this room are from the "leave it to Beaver generation". It's done, it's gone, it's a dead issue. Most of us had to ask our parents if we could have the keys to the car and go somewhere. These kids are now getting cars, they're more mobile, and that has a lot to do with the level of commitment. It's made them more social, but the way you turn that around is by having a strong team philosophy. You get those kids and those parents to buy into that philosophy and the tradition of your program. If they don't buy into it, let them go.

Amy: I think it's harder for parents to do all the different activities for their kids. It's harder for them to be committed as parents, so it's harder for the kids to be committed. Once we get them hooked on the sport, I find very little problem on commitment.

Tom A.: I want to echo that. It seems to me that back when I was growing up, if you went down to the park, and back then there was a park near you, instead of a sub-division, you could play a pick up basketball, baseball or football game. Now there is no such thing. You have to have a uniform to be on the soccer team, you have to be in organized T-ball leagues, there no such thing as kids just playing anymore. Now it's organized sports. So it seems as though for a lot of people who come for the swim team these days, it's another activity for their kid to participate in as opposed to it's really a sport that the parent wants their kid to be involved in. Most of them have no clue about what swimming is or the commitment that it will entail down the road.

Tom H.: I think a lot of this "commitment level" has to be taught to the kids. It's got to come from the coaches who have to teach the kids as well as the parents. There are coaches who think it's a job, it's a dollar, they don't care whether their kid shows up for practice, they don't tell their kids they should be there 3 out of 7 days of practice. If you're there, you're there; if you're not, you're not. If a 7 or 8 year old has a bad experience and they think what year 'round swimming is all about, a lot of them just go, disappear. They don't try another club. A lot of it has to fall on us, the coaches, to teach everybody that showing up for practice, being at every practice, and being at meets when your kids are swimming. I can't understand how kids go to swim meets and have no coaches there. What kind of commitment is that?

Amy: It's important that when a swimmer first starts swimming, that you gradually introduce levels of commitment. That's what we do at Seacoast. You have to be really careful about exposing them to parent obligations and be really careful when you are thinking about what meets they are going to go to when they first start because you want to set them up

with a positive experience, so they get hooked. Then you gradually introduce the commitment slowly. That's the way we do it and we found it really works.

Tony: I agree with that. We offer a lot of flexibility in our program at the very young ages in the developmental groups. In our situation, we are not able to offer that flexibility as they get into the groups where they need to have more commitment, so we are forced to take the commitment and force that commitment on them, but it's how we present that to them and how you out there present that commitment to your swimmers. We need to make them feel like they belong and are going to have a positive experience. I encourage our young athletes to try other sports because I think it's important for coordination development and for learning what they really like. That's why we offer flexibility at the very young ages.

Comment (Audience): My perspective is that technique is the foundation of about any age group program. We talked about a program that takes a kid from age 9 to 12 who swims 3 to 5 thousand yards in practice and going into a senior program where they're doing double or triple that. Isn't there room for a transition? At 13, don't they go 8 to 10 thousand. Should we push? I don't know if that's the right thing. If you are 11 or 12 and setting records because you are bigger and stronger, and then at 14, all of a sudden, you are not setting those records, what is the emotional effect? We look at it from an emotional standpoint. A lot of times when we talk about age group swimming, we should put ourselves in a kid's shoes. We should use a goal incentive rather than a record incentive.

Patty: All of us take pride in being teachers first and coaches second. I'm the transition to the senior team and feel a grave responsibility because I'm the

last window of opportunity. They have to have the skills first to train. It doesn't matter how much you do. We emphasize it's how you do what you do.

Amy: When I first started coaching, I worried about yardage. Then we were at a wonderful age group talk at an ASCA clinic where a coach said not to worry about yardage, don't keep track of yardage, just think about content and technique. From then on I did not keep track of yardage for the 10 & unders. Technique is absolutely crucial at the young ages. If they don't have the technique, they're not going to be able to train without injury.

Tom H.: I agree with what you're saying too, but what I'm saying is this transition period doesn't necessarily have to be at 13. Yes, there is a transition period, but it could be at 11. I'm thinking about a comment from a coach, "How do you know when you get this kid at 11 or 12 that it might be their last chance to win a gold medal?" I totally disagree with that. Our philosophy at NBAC is not to get so much out of the kid as early as possible or as much as you can because we're also looking down the road. Our philosophy is they need to have a good base to be successful. We have two examples: Whitney and Beth were in my age group practice until 12. Beth did a senior cut out of the age group or lower level practice. Whitney had already placed at Jr. Nationals the first year after she was up. You take each individual when they seem ready to do it. Beth Botsford broke a NAG record four months after she was swimming. She started swimming year round just before she turned ten. We didn't immediately push her up into the senior group and she was going 5 days a week because she wasn't emotionally or physically ready.

Tom A.: I guess it also depends on your pool availability, the time, and how you structure your practices. In my particular club I basically coach all of the 14 and unders. We have, in our particular group, one or two 14 year olds who have Jr. National cuts and who are swimming with our senior team, which is basically high school age. We have broken it more by age, but I also have a 13 year old who has a senior national cut and who stayed with me because I didn't think she was mature enough to handle the senior practices. It had nothing to do with her ability level.

Comment (Murray Stephens): What is age group swimming about? Age group swimming was born because there wasn't enough of a base for senior swimming. USS talks about having to be a team at the senior level, but they don't talk about the swimmers at the age group level as being part of the team. We're all part of the team here and we need to find swimmers who ultimately will be good enough to represent the US at the international level. We are part of the team and we have to plan our season and our quadrenium with that in mind. We are part of the team for the total development at the top of the pyramid. That's the whole concept, the pyramid concept in age group swimming. It has been from the beginning.

Comment (Audience): A large segment of our swimmers feel that USS is ignoring the 15-18 BB swimmer. They've been swimming since 8 years old and now there is nothing for them.

Patty: During school, there's the high school championship to shoot for, going for best times, and dual meets. If you have a senior championship and they're not fast enough to make that, seek out another meet for that level to go to and say that that's their meet to peak at and that they should do a good

job. Treat each swimmer as an individual. Tell them to think about their individual goals and to not compare themselves to the best swimmer on the team who might be an Olympic Trial Qualifier. Not everyone can be an Olympic Trial Qualifier.

Comment (Audience): Where I think the perfect mix comes from is from the very successful programs, the ones which know how to exactly train the swimmer, but are set up with a philosophy, and are going to graduate doctors and lawyers and teachers. Your training gets you to the Olympics; your philosophy is what's going to produce everybody.

Tom A.: Age group swimming is about trying to give everybody the opportunity to be as good as they can be.